

Got a problem? Go tell the Army

BY GEOFF ZIEZULEWICZ

Stars and Stripes

Depending upon your rank, Army life in Europe can be chock full of droopy-eyed junior enlisteds, power-mad NCOs or know-nothing "butter-bar" lieutenants.

Meaningful change to policies can seem as distant as the States.

But commanders do want to know how they can improve life for soldiers, civilians and family members.

And as this year's round of Army Family Action Plan conferences take place in most garrisons over the next month, organizers want to hear what you think.

If the idea is good enough, it might even be kicked around in the halls of the top department of the Army echelon.

And believe it or not, change can come from the meetings.

In Baumholder, Germany, last year, one AFAP conference participant was concerned that registered civilian sex offenders from the States did not have to register once they were part of USAREUR, said Sarah Dayton, a community information specialist with Baumholder's Army Community Services, which is hosting the local AFAP get-together in early March.

The idea of making nonmilitary sex offenders register with their local Provost Marshal's Office is now being considered at the highest level of the Army, she said, and it was helped along by a suggestion that worked its way up from Baumholder.

"It's a great way for people who feel that no one listens," Dayton said, adding that soldiers, spouses,

civilians, retirees and teens can all take part.

The Army's Thrift Savings Plan also started within local AFAP conferences, said Jane Helfrich, the regional AFAP manager for the Army's U.S. Installation Command-Europe.

Likening it to the political process in the States, Helfrich said that things have gotten better through the conferences.

And while not all issues brought up will make it to the top of the Army, some don't need to and can be addressed by garrison commanders, she said.

"Some things may be pet rocks, and they're not going to go anywhere, and some things may be very installation-specific," Helfrich said. "But there are issues that have relevance for the total Army family, soldiers, civilians, family members. And when we get that kind of issue, it's very exciting."

Worthy issues that aren't installation-specific are kicked up to a USAREUR-level conference and then to an Army wide equivalent if necessary, she said.

Most USAREUR conferences are taking place in the next month, and organizers can always use more participants, Helfrich said.

The idea is to reach everyone who has an issue they would like addressed and have it

at least looked at in the conference's focus groups, said Melinda Thomas, the AFAP coordinator for Baumholder.

"We're trying to reach everyone," she said. "During the conference, there is no rank. Everybody's in civilian clothes, and we want to hear everyone's voice."

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Conferences across Europe

Most U.S. Army Europe garrisons are holding their annual Army Family Action Plan conferences in the coming weeks. For more information on how to participate, contact your local Army Community Services office.

Bamberg: Feb. 26-28

Baumholder:

March 5-8

Darmstadt:

Feb. 27-March 1

Heidelberg: Feb. 21-22

Hohenfels:

March 19-20

Mannheim: Feb. 21-22

Schweinfurt:

Feb. 27-March 1

Stuttgart:

Jan. 30-Feb. 2

USAG Ansbach:

Feb. 13-14 in Illesheim

USAG Brussels:

March 13-15

USAG Schinnen:

Feb. 8-9

USAG SHAPE:

March 13-15